

Information Skills and Primary Sources in Education

"These resources have made history come alive for my students and have allowed them to become 'historians' working with primary documents."

Mike Federspiel

1997 American Memory Fellow

The Library of Congress is on the move in secondary education. The Library's online American Memory collections are being eagerly discovered by school teachers and media specialists who have found a wealth of Americana primary source material previously unavailable to them. For a glimpse at these photographs, documents, maps, films and recordings and how they are being used in education, visit the Library of Congress Learning Page <<http://learning.loc.gov/learn/>>. Here you will find descriptions of the collections with correlations to school curricula, search guides, sample lesson plans, and student activities. By harnessing technology to an ambitious outreach program, the Library serves a new constituency—one that we feel is important to the vitality of this nation.

How It Started

An evaluation project during 1991-1993 systematically introduced the early American Memory collections to various audiences: colleges and universities, public libraries, special libraries, state libraries, and schools. Then distributed on CD-ROM and videodiscs, these collections were of great interest to educators using primary sources to supplement history and social studies curricula. This growing interest coupled with the rapid growth of Internet connectivity in the nation's schools presented an opportunity for the Library to use technology to make these materials more accessible. Like many cultural institutions, the Library of Congress began preparing its American Memory special collections for presentation on the World Wide Web <<http://memory.loc.gov/>>.

The success of the pilot program enabled the Library to launch a major educational outreach initiative. Initially funded with a three-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we began in 1995 to define what role the Library should play in education via its Web site and the American Memory collections. Understanding that education is a national issue but a local affair, we identified 25 leading teachers and media specialists from

across the country to help shape our outreach effort. It became clear that while some teachers were using a variety of primary sources in their classrooms, because these resources had been difficult to find and acquire, most teachers had limited experience integrating them into the curriculum in a sustaining way. Our educational advisors observed that it was not enough just to know about the Library of Congress American Memory collections on the Web; teachers needed hands-on training using the materials. Teachers also needed contextual material to help them understand the structure and provenance of the collections and major themes represented.

The American Memory Fellows Program

American Memory Fellows Program and the Learning Page became the focus of our work during 1996 and 1997. A week-long summer institute formed the centerpiece for this program, which brought 25 two-person teams to the Library of Congress for the purpose of developing sample American Memory lesson plans. Teams were selected based on experience using primary sources to motivate students, access to and comfort using technology in teaching, and professional leadership skills. Twenty states were represented among these teams. Facilitated by the EDC Center for Children and Technology, the institute provided the Fellows with hands-on experience searching the collections and developing sample activities that drew upon primary source materials from the Library's American Memory collections. Throughout the 1997-1998 school year, the Fellows tested their lesson plans in the classroom and participated in an online discussion group.

The institute was designed as a collaborative laboratory. We designed a four-week pre-institute online conferencing environment plus a six-month post-institute listserv. These components proved to be an invaluable part of the design. Participants got to know each other online, shared project ideas, and explored the Library of Congress Web site prior to arriving in Washington. Likewise, the listserv served as an easy way to facilitate peer review of the developing lesson plans after the institute.

In addition to hands-on training, participants spent a day at the Library of Congress meeting with curators and discussing technical challenges associated with building a digital archive. This experience sparked ideas about teaching children how to build an archive, how to recognize the part from the whole, the point of view of an item or collection, and the physical presentation of an archival collection.

Energy, enthusiasm, and imagination flowed as American Memory Fellows brainstormed teaching ideas, located resources, and

began to work on their lesson plans. Some chose to follow “the essential question” model, establishing a broad research question to focus student exploration of the online collections. Others emphasized visual literacy techniques to sharpen student observation skills and help students identify what they need to know to “read” a picture. Many engaged their students in oral history exercises—interviewing members of their own communities about a specific topic or time in history. Questions of “then and now” surfaced as educators wrestled with the best way to engage students in the primary source materials. As Fellows became more familiar with the collections, the wealth of material was almost overwhelming. “The only challenge connected with the collection is its sheer size and scope...that having [been] said...what a wonderful challenge it is!” noted one of the Fellows.

The Learning Page

Recognizing this challenge and the need to provide contextual information about the collections, the Library in 1996 launched the Learning Page—an online gateway to the American Memory collections designed for teachers and students. This is a good starting point for educators who wish to “Learn More About It.” From these pages, the archival collections are described from an educational perspective with links to topics covered in the school curriculum. Items from the collection are highlighted along with suggested search words enabling teachers to dip into the collection with successful search techniques. Topical pathfinders enable educators to get a bird’s-eye view of subjects represented in the collections. Sample lesson plans, curriculum ideas, feature presentations, and technical information round out the Learning Page into a guide to effective use of the American Memory site.

Ultimately the goal of any teacher is to engage students in “the hunt” as well as in the substance of the primary source materials. The

“Historical Detective” and “The Big Picture” are two student activities designed for these purposes. In the first, an item from the collection is presented with “clues” about its identity. Students are encouraged to think like detectives in a historical framework and find that item within a collection on the Web site. The second activity is a jigsaw puzzle that changes weekly. Again, an item from one of the collections is presented in puzzle “pieces.” The goal is to reassemble the puzzle within a specific time frame. Puzzles over the course of each month provide clues to a “Big Picture,” which highlights a monthly theme using materials from the American Memory collections. As time goes on, more descriptive materials for teachers and activities for students will be added to the Learning Page.

What’s Ahead

Our experience of the last three years points to the continuing need for teacher training in the use of primary source materials. Although this is a new area for many educators, primary sources are finding their way into established curriculum guidelines. In North Carolina, for example, for the first time the use of primary source materials is incorporated into the information skills curriculum. We see professional development as a collaborative effort between the Library of Congress and educational practitioners. This collaboration is paying off as our 1997 American Memory Fellows fan out into their own communities, speak at professional conferences, and train others in their schools. Their enthusiasm for the American Memory collections is contagious.

With help from the Ford Foundation and other generous donors, the Library of Congress is moving ahead with an ambitious plan to reach teachers in all 50 states by the year 2000 through a combination of online and in-person professional development workshops. We will be hosting an American Memory Fellows institute this summer and again in 1999. And, we will expand the content of the Learning Page to include teacher-developed sample lesson plans and professional development resources to facilitate informal “train the trainer” workshops. Our most ardent supporters are the teachers and media specialists who have helped us shape the program. We look forward to helping this new constituency blossom in the years ahead.

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Two young women posed with a loaded car at Yellowstone. Photo courtesy Yellowstone National Park Archives.

